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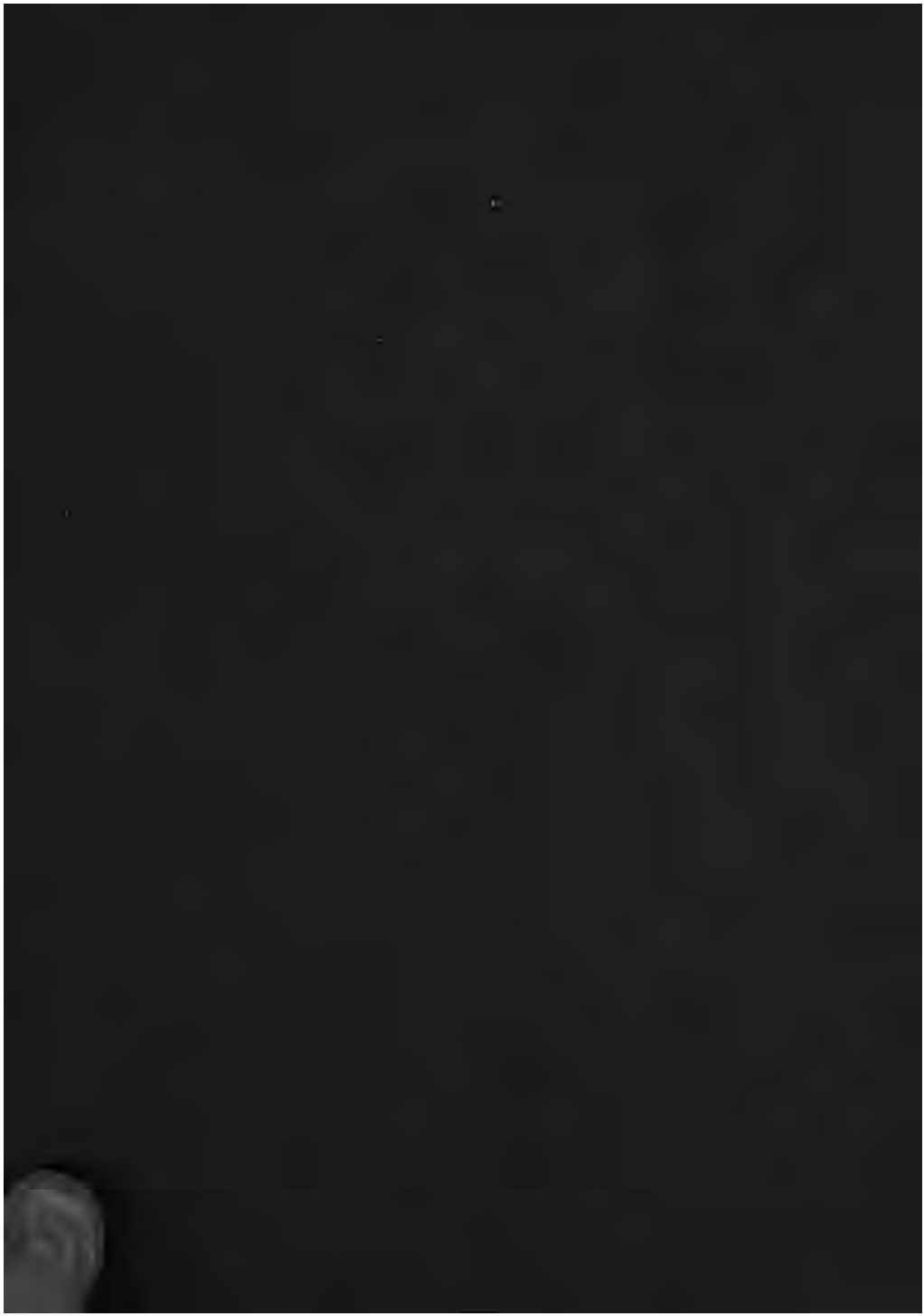

MELUSINE

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MELUSINE
BY · GEORGE · ERNLE

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MELUSINE

PART I

Once on a time and in the years of yore
A maiden lived whom earthly mother bore
And fairies stole. Her name was Melusine,
And whom she served was of the fairies Queen.
This Queen so loved her for her lovely face
And for her courtesy and for her grace,
She bade her on a day a boon to choose—
Ask what she would, she could her naught refuse.
'I choose,' quoth she, 'to be an earthly maid':
And though they chided and for all they prayed,
She would but this. Then though the Queen were loth,
Yet she must yield, for saving of her oath,
Far as she might (since out of fairy thrall,
Queen though she were, she might not free her all);
So spake and answered—'Thou shalt serve,' quoth she,
'One night in seven. For the rest, go free.
But, Melusine, betray not us and ours,
Nor bring with thee no mortals to our bowers.
This, Melusine, thou diest, if thou dost.'
Bowed Melusine as meekly as she must.
No better ways her freedom was to win,
So forth she went. Here doth her tale begin.
Nigh to a forest rose a slippery steep
Of burnt brown turf, a pasturage of sheep,

Browèd with rocks, which overhung and gave
A little shallow shelter like a cave.
A clear-cut shadow slept on summer-noons
There, to the bumble-bee's moss-tangled tunes.
Dwarf bracken filled the hollow of the ground
Before it, and the foxglove clustered round
Of bells nigh beggared ; there were harebells sown
Over the thin scalp of each baking stone.
Here day by day under blue lonely skies
The maiden sits with longing in her eyes,
No further daring toward the world she needs,
Than from a wood a rabbit runs and feeds.
But on a morning, as it chancèd so,
She heard one hunting in the woods below,
And on the stag he followed such a spell
She cast as drew the creature to her cell,
And after him both hounds and hunter sped.
It was a boy, but newly ripe to wed,
In looks a maid, but manly to the ear—
Who kissed his roses had no thorns to fear.
Wide-eyed with wonder he drew rein to see
Clad in her hair, which hid her to the knee,
A girl—her arm a snowy halter placed
About the trembling quarry that he chased—
And smiling on his hounds which leapt and bayed.
Swift was his thought—'It is an holy maid.'

Look to the hounds! By God, they will her slay!'
So down he leapt and whipped his hounds away;
And thus the maid yet smiling him addressed—
'Beautiful boy, this creature is my guest.
Spare him—to murder is not in thy mien.
I am a maiden, I am Melusine,
And here I dwell all out of sight and mind,
Because I will not commerce with my kind
Whiles they are cruel. But if thou wilt mend—
Wilt thou?—I welcome thee and call thee friend.'
And with the word all suddenly she gave
Her hands in his and drew him to the cave;
There in the shadow seated him apace
And stood before him smiling in his face.
The boy was dumber than the beast whose dread
Snorted beside him. His wits wanderèd.
But when he saw her smiling he awoke
Hotly to speech and stammered as he spoke.
His name was Melisèrt and he the son
Of Sagramore and brethren had he none,
Nor parents—all were buried long ago.
These hills he hunted and had thought to know
Until that morn: but never had he known,
God was adorèd in their hollow stone
By maiden's knee. 'For lady, as I guess,'
Quoth he, 'thou art an holy hermitess,

Casting thy beauty like a beggar's shoe
In an old pit, to home in yonder blue.'
'Friend, all I am,' she smiled, 'thou seëst well,
And there remains no more of me to tell.
I tumbled as I played when I was young,
As children will, and bit into my tongue,
As children do; and rising, well-a-day,
What told the past was bitten clean away;
The bit which tells the present only left.
Prithee, remember I am so bereft.
Though thou should'st question until I should weep,
What is, I only tell—what was, I keep.
Now rendering thee such answer as I can—
I am a maiden as thou art a man.
Art thou content with this? As I hear say,
This hath contented many in their day.
Be thou contented, and unless thou art,
As of thy will thou camest, so depart.'
Content was Melisert. His eyes were deep
In beauty, as a hundred head of sheep
All feeding fast should wander in a mead,
Where yet the grass springs faster than they feed.
He was content with anything to be
Still where he was, still what he saw to see,
And fain to catch and kiss, to touch and toy;
But clear she eyèd him as boy eyes boy

Or as friend friend, with eyes that hold no guile.
And yet her eyes were in his heart the while.
He was her book ; she read him by her lore,
And liked him much and that he loved her, more.
When she had questioned him of state and friend
And found him free and fitted for her end,
With this and that they talked the sun to rest.
At last she pointed to the waning west
And rising spake—'And now, companion dear,
Go, lest the night fall and thy friends have fear.
Come back no sooner than thyself art fain ;
And yet come soon, come soon to me again.
Good-night, good-night. Gladness thy steps attend ;
Be yet a little sad to leave me, friend.'
And with the words, all sudden, ere he wist,
In her two hands she caught his face and kissed
Once, twice, and thrice, on cheeks and chin ; anon
Slipped from him with low laughter and was gone.
Homeward he rode with anger in his heart.
'To bear the first kiss is a woman's part.
I had a mind to kiss but let it cool,
Till in she thrust and made of me her fool.
Alack, alack, what shame is fallen me,
To suffer kisses and not one but three,
And sit there blushing with a bumpkin face !
What should a man have done in such a case ?

Methinks, her kisses he had hotly paid—
That when she fled, she had not fled a maid.
A man had ta'en his will of her, I trow,
In her own cave and wept she never so.
That were a man's way: women love the strong.
And yet it were a churl's deed her to wrong.
Yea, but she mocks me! Let her then beware!
Thinks she that I shall sit and blush and bear
Upon my cheeks her kisses and her scorn?
I will come back, I swear, to-morrow morn,
And as she gives me fuel, shall I flame.
Best look she 'scape a singeing in the same!
Hot is my body when I think of it.'
So the boy blustered in his windy wit,
Till the pressed pillows came the peace to keep,
And lo, his sudden youth was sound asleep.
He slept not long; about his heart was hung,
By joy the swallow, such a sound of young,
Who twittered ere the dawn 'Leave, leave thy bed!
Fetch us more food, we have but lightly fed.'
Morn finds a lover where his eve was sweet.
In every meadow had he wet his feet,
Ere sunrise, 'twixt his dreams and his desire.
There stood the hill, his rocks with dawn afire,
And peering through the tree-trunks here he stood.
A little stream divided hill and wood,

Whose rushing shallows and whose rattling sound
Made woods and hill seem turning round and round.
There knelt the maiden, to the water clear
Bending her lips and drinking like a deer,
Deaf to his feet. He clasped her suddenly
And kissed, and up she struggled with a cry.
With kisses, cheek and chin and o'er and o'er,
He reddened her who rosy was before,
Till stifling, with a laugh she wried away.
'Good morrow, friend. So early up to-day?
What good wind blows thee hither?—Tell it me.'
Hoarsely he answered, 'What but love of thee?
Oh why hast thou the beauty of the snow,
Or having it, needest thou naked go
And sling it like a stone into mine eye?
Beshrew thy beauty! I am hurt thereby.
And thy three kisses, for the whose sweet sake
I am as one thrice bitten by a snake.
All night from set of sun until his rise
Wast thou betwixt mine eyelids and mine eyes
Stealing my sleep; and if at all I might
Sleep for pure weariness in thy despite,
Dreams grew thy dwelling, and I ceased not so
From seeing thee—not though I willed it, no.
What brings me hither? Wilt thou ask me this?
What but our game beginning in a kiss?

Which if thou wilt not finish, so begun,
Then farewell, gladness. My good days are done!'
'Why, Melisert, what wouldest thou of me?'
He cried 'What would I? Why, thy love,' quoth he.
'Tis thine,' she laughed, 'now rest thee satisfied.'
'O Melusine, no, Melusine,' he sighed,
'Mock not thy lover. Other love he craves
Than hunt thee on the hills and in the caves
Meet thee or miss thee and for only pay
Vain words, vain longings and one kiss a day.
Give me thy love. Give me the love between
A man and a maid. Thou knowest, Melusine.
Come, I shall teach thee.' But she put him by
And glancing downward, bright of cheek and eye,
'Nay, Melisert, never of this,' quoth she,
'I dreamed, be God the judge 'twixt thee and me.
Sorrow and shame not in a friend I seek.
I looked and saw a sister in thy cheek,
Thine heart I saw not, no, nor his desire;
And lo, thou art a man with thoughts of mire!
Nay, let us part ere think upon such joy!
I would thou wert a maid or I a boy.
And yet—and yet—(our wisest were to part)—
Yet—if I lie so heavy on thy heart
That, losing me, thou losest everything,
Oh, take me hence and wed me with a ring

And feed thy passion and when passion ends,
Pray God we find the remnant of the friends
We might have rested without doubt or care,
Were thy heart wise, as would to God it were.'
So saying, she uplifted, shy and sweet,
Her eyes: his own had sunken to his feet,
And as her colour sank his mounted red.
'Ah, wed thee, lady—there is time to wed.
I may not wait, I crave so what I crave.
Make me thy husband yonder in the cave,
And in my dwelling thou shalt surely be
Wife, and in time enough, I swear it thee.'
'Look in mine eyes, shew if thine eyes be true,'
Quoth she. 'Ah dear, be truth betwixt us two.
I love thee, and shall love thee while I live.
This body were a little gift to give
Thee for thy pleasure, would it ease thy pain,
And make thee happy and my friend again,
And all were said. But would it, would it so?
Ah no, my Melisert—in truth, love, no.
Had'st thou thy pleasure, then this eventide
Should I alone upon this cold hill-side
Stare on the melancholy clouds which lay
In black black bands across the death of day
Lost and forever. And thou wouldest win
Thy threshold, night behind and care within.

Love were a weary memory in thy heart.
O Melisert, a child, a child thou art.
And I—thou wouldest leave me from this day
Like a child's flowers, soon picked, soon thrown away.'
Thus went the words between them, morn till noon,
And Evening entered to the self-same tune.
He got no money singing at that gate.
'Enough,' she said, 'Tis growing dark and late.
Put up thy lips, friend. Kiss and go thy way.
Good friend, good-night. There is no more to say.'
So home he went. And to his heart he said,
'In all the tales I ever heard or read
Of love and longing 'twas men's honour still
To master women and to win their will.
Is it all false? What is it rings amiss?
To lie is bitter, lying with a kiss,
And bitter to be mean and lie in vain;
And where we love and would be loved again,
To wince is bitter and be whipped with eyes.
Now for the many who have called me wise,
How with a beggar maiden should I wed?
Yet must the beggar maiden to my bed.
For in and out of season and of place
Only her eyes I see, only her face—
A little brown but serious and sweet—
Only her beauty like the bending wheat,

And like dark-leavèd apples, round and rare,
Her brown breasts ripening in her hanging hair.
Out of my careful heart spring every hour
A thousand thoughts and each is like a flower.
Their roots wind in and under and about—
Not if I willed it could I plough them out.
And will it will I never. Let them be.'
So came he homeward with perplexity
And tossing all the night counted the chimes
And slept but little and was up betimes.
Swiftly and silently and without rest
Earth spins and brings all lovers on her breast
Round to their morrows when they rise anew
And run together like the drops of dew
Among the shadows and the silences.
Ere the first chilly light over the trees
Maid Melusine, sick that the night was done,
Stood on the summit calling up the Sun.
And up at last he rolled into the skies.
She stood with claspèd hands and staring eyes,
Naked and slender as a cowslip flower,
And flushed with youth and longing and the hour.
With straining eyes, with twining fingers, still
She listened. Now his foot was on the hill
Whom she awaited; his, who as he came
Spied her upon the mountains like a flame.

And now they met, not sparing any kiss
Whether on that cheek growing or on this
Or on the red lips—in no other sort
Than flocks in feedings where the grass is short
Pluck up the roots and eat them, white of hue.
And out of breath for kissing, back they drew
Their heads to look, till looking grew to pain
And then they passionately kissed again.
Now her sweet thief, filling his hands with gold,
Back by the tresses haled her to behold
His kisses fade, and that in fear to fall
She might the closer cling, and best of all
Brush her bright bosoms on his heaving breast.
He laughed for happiness and spake in jest—
'No, sweet fox, struggle in the snare no more.
Art thou a fox? Thou lackest of their lore.
Nor art thou cony, bitten in the feet
By the trap's teeth, which mangle as they meet—
Nor cony's foe, the white and ruddy stoat,
Stark in a gap, thy death about thy throat—
Nor hurt by stone or arrow or the snare.
Yet none the less I hold thee by the hair.
Now wottest thou how I shall deal with thee?
Down in yon wood and tethered to a tree,
A steed stands saddled who on back doth bear
Such clothing as fair women use to wear.

This thou shalt don and I shall shew thee how,
Though in such business small skill enow
Have I, no matter—I shall learn the trade.
Lo, Melusine, thou makest me a maid!
When of thy beauty all men may not see
Is made a secret betwixt thee and me,
Then will I bear thee thither where I dwell
And marry thee this day and love thee well.
Clap hands. A bargain! There is naught amiss.
Hide not thy face, but give it to me to kiss.
Thou art the very colour of a bride.'
Then was such broken music in her side,
She might not answer. Nerveless bowèd knees
As when large apples bow young apple trees;
And gladder were her eyes his eyes to shun
Than if they late had lookèd at the sun.
Joy knocked upon her heart so suddenly,
It could but gasp and utter sigh on sigh
Faster than bubble chases bubble aloft
When a staff sinketh into sedges soft.
This way and that way turnèd she her head,
But his lips followed faster than hers fled.
And at the last they fell into accord
That she should be his wife and he her lord.
Softly they sate and murmured on their hill
In one another's arms as lovers will.

Shyly they touchèd oft with lip and hand,
As half afeared lest by the very wand
Which turned so suddenly all old things new
Themselves be touchèd and made strangers too.
Sweetly they sighed their wooing to retell,
Till on their heart-beats such a quiet fell,
As stilleth voices in a little town
Leaving its labour, while the sun goes down
And dark in tower against the dying day
A sweet, slow, single bell rings men to pray.
Her lover at her feet, she sat at ease
With claspèd hands about her naked knees,
Staring afar, and thus with a deep sigh—
'Sweet, there is bitter in my breast which I
Would utter—but I never had a tongue.
Melisert, thou art young, and I am young,
And yet I am thine elder, many a day,
And folks will say—no matter, let them say,
Why should it vex me? Yet they will not lie,
Not though they speak what I were liefer die
Than hear, mine own;—as that I bring thee shame,
A beggar wench, a wife without a name,
Found in the fields—ah yes, it all is true.
O clasp me, Melisert, thy bosom to!
Stifle my thoughts up, kiss away my fears.
Heed not these tears. There, there, they are but tears'

(Her eyes brimmed and ran over as this she said).
'A proper folly thou hast found to wed!
Lo, I can smile through these. Do I not smile?
Ah, what a fool am I to weep the while
I laugh, all glad of heart although it ache.
Ah God, that I were better for thy sake,
Sweet—that I brought thee honour and renown!
Ah God, that for these naked hands and brown
I brought such wealth as should the world advise
"This lad hath wit; his wedding shews him wise."
Well, all is as it must, not as it might.
Is no brown pitcher but would fain be white,
Might it have chosen. Though I wish things rare,
Things are not so—'tis pity but they were.
All my fine wishings add not to my price,
And that thou seëst, dear, if thou hast eyes:
A little beauty (for right fair am I.
I needs must know and wherefore should I lie?)—
A little beauty and much humble will,
Whatso thy wish, to wish that only still,
And serve thee ever with what strength I may—
Nay, this is naught, naught that I meant to say.
From the beginning must I speak anew.
Sweet, friends shall tell—and they shall tell thee true—

To worldly seeming is thy choice not wise.
Full well I know, love sees with other eyes,
And so from blindness love may save his sight,
I say the world is wrong and love is right.
But love is blind, men tell us. Well I know,
The case is common that he falleth so
And can see naught which he was wont espy.
Cometh a fairer, blinded is love's eye;
Or else of one he wearies and is fain
Of change. Love's eyes then, they are blind again.
Soon as he gropes and wonders where he is,
The World is in his ear to lend him his.
Cries World—"Am I the fool I seemed, young friend?
Here take mine eyes. All use them in the end.
Old World he knows the best. He sees the way.
When I say 'nay' hereafter, say not 'yea.'
Boys will be boys. They learn. Soon hot, soon cool."
So the World often makes love seem his fool,
And rightly, say I; for if such love be
That in a week or in a month or three
All his fine sayings he unsay and fall
Into forgetfulness—why love at all?'
Nay, I must speak and thou must listen, sweet.
First will I rise and stand upon my feet,
And so do thou. Yea, kiss me, if thou list.
Now hold me so, in either hand a wrist,

And look upon me well from feet to crown.
Turn me about, dear, look me up and down.
Look with a look, may last until I die.
Upon my wedding-day, lo, such was I
In figure and in face. Were both not fair?
Such was the very colour of my hair,
Such and none other. And my grey eyes two,
As these thou seëst, were in shade and hue.
God is my witness, all was as I say.
Now hast thou made an end of looking? Yea?
Loose me and speak the truth then. Speak it whole,
Although thou drag it struggling from thy soul
All ugly, as are truths which loathe the light.
Such as I stand before thee, do I quite
The price thou payest and which friend and foe
Will call thee mad for paying—yes or no?
Nay, sweet, consider. Be it sad and strange,
I want the truth, the truth which will not change
For ever. Only breathe not love to-day,
Then say, too late, what now the world would say.
Nay, Melisert, be not offended. There!
Thine eyes are answers and no need to swear.
Thou art all love, all truth, all constancy.
Yet a great army are the years to be,
Day marching after day in silent strength,
And thou, love, will they war thee down at length?

There, there, forgive me and a foolish tongue:
Only, sweet love, thou art so young—so young.
Well, I must trust thee. Must it not be so?
Yea, dear, and thou in turn must trust. For lo,
What knowest thou of me or of my heart?
Naught—and thou carest naught. A boy thou art,
Caught by the colours of skin, eyes and hair
(And I confess if thou accuse me—fair).
Yet were it well to question of the rest;
Or be a boy for ever—that were best.
Shut thou thine eyes, and I shall guide aright.
Yet must thou know this, that each seventh night
I go somewhither, I may not abide.
One night in seven and I must from thy side
Whither thou knowest not nor may I shew,
Nor shalt thou follow me nor send to know,
Nay, nor ev'n question me, nor tempt me tell.
Swear to me this. Thou swearest—that is well.
Swear it again, dear, for in simple this
Lies little as thou dreamest, woe or bliss
For thee and me through long years yet unborn.
Swear it once more. Now art thou triply sworn.
Now, for thou swearest and with so sweet an air,
Wide-eyed and serious as boys in prayer
Kneel to their mothers, though thy love am I;
And since thy 'yes' is wedded to no 'why'—

For which, love, kisses on thine eyes I pay—
Therefore I tell thee what upon a day
May lighten loads thou little dreamest now.
When 'neath the ticking clock lone liest thou
In wonder where I wend and what I do,
Remember this—that I am lonely too.
God knows thy wife unto no revel wends,
And if with friends to meet, what manner friends?
Thou canst not guess; so I must tell thee who.
Warm winds on summer nights; the moon; the dew;
Grass growing with no sound; streams on their way
Singing the songs, none listen to by day,
To little lonely bridges; stories old,
Which are stars now and written up in gold,
Of Harp and Crown, the Hunter and the Bear,
Andromeda chained 'mid her blowing hair
For death to slay, for love to save her whole;
And all the midnight thinkings of the soul
Which waxes wider than the vault above
Like an high hall where life and death and love
Walk sisters, hand in hand, and all are fair
And each as all—there is no fairest there.
Think with thyself—is any harm herein?
True, it is strange. Strange is not alway sin.
This is a matter which thou may'st not see.
Then be content. Shut eyes and trust in me.

Or if thou can'st not, liefer than betray
Me and my secret, cast us both away
Now. Nay enough, I need none other oath.
Be this the pledge of love betwixt us both,
To trust me utterly beyond all sight.
And when this burden is no longer light,
Oh then believe, believe, though thou love still,
Love sinks apace—'tis time to write his will.
In his beginning love is like a fire,
The more is heapèd on, he leaps the higher,
Turning dry sticks and rubble, which we pile,
To warmth and light; but in a little while
Finding his height, stayeth, and sinketh slow;
Heap then no burden on, lest out he go.
Now I have spoken all from first to last,
Welcome, thou future, and thou sullen past,
Farewell. The bitter from mine heart is out.
Sweet Melisert, thou musest in a doubt,
Yea and small wonder, who hast sermon borne
And from thy wife and on thy wedding morn
And meant the while naught but was good and true.
So trust me, love, I am not wont to do.
Now let us kiss, now let us sing and play.
O sun, O wind. It is our wedding day."
Yet sweeter things they spake, these lovers two,
And more than I withal may have ado.

So many and such bitter miles of sea
Toss 'twixt me and the watchers on the quay!
Up in the wind, tale, and about for shore.
Down Melisert ran to the wood and bore
Her clothing back and clad her in the same.
Her dressing as of children was a game.
When she was ready and they turned to go—
'Sweet cave, adieu;' quoth she, 'stay so, just so,
In mine heart's heart. Let fade no single stone.
From thee was nothing hidden of my lone
Long waiting, and the anguish of mine eyes
E'en for the wishèd one, who would not rise
Yet rose at length, and glorious to see—
This Sun which lighted Melisert to me,
And me to him, and love to both, and joy
To love. Ah, ever may it last, sweet boy,
This joy! I ask no better when I die.
Though it be sin to say so, so say I.
So, let us hence.' Upon his horse she clomb.
He walked beside and led her to his home.

PART II

His fair large manor stood in a large ground
And with a wall of stones was girdled round.
Within were mown lawns, out in order laid;
Wide walks of gravel, striped with sun and shade;
Hedges of yew, cut into walls and towers,
Sun-steeped, with solid shadows. There were flowers
In breadth of burning colours; there were trees,
Those for their fruit, and for their shadow these.
A clear stream came in flowing from the North
Under an arch; a second sent him forth.
And dusky trouts in the cold current's speed
Lay, head to stream and wavering with the weed,
His shadow wavering with him under each.
At shallow turn of the deep silent reach
Oft with a sudden wash the water sent
A throatless cry which through the garden went
From wall to wall, and startled folk adream
To listen, and then smile 'it was the stream.'
No sound did enter, but to please the ears;
The lap of water, and soft click of shears,
Bird-notes, the unfelt breeze ruffling a tree,
And the comings and the goings of the bee.
A man might dwell at ease for ever there
Nor know there was a world without, nor care.

And in the manor there was peacefulness.
He loved it who had built it as I guess.
Wide were the chambers with low ceilings all,
Wide were the hearths and low. Nigh half the wall
Was window and nigh half the window, lead.
The flooring was of tiles, broad, even, red.
Black were the panels and of mirroring oak:
With every step their glimmerings up-broke.
Blue lavender was laid to please the air
Abroad in jars and bowls. Under the stair
In shadow stood a stately clock to keep
Of hours so calm a measure loved of sleep.
Hither led Melisert; with faltering feet
She crept beside him, tremulous and sweet,
Her brown cheeks burning, happy of her hood.
Her gliding was a wild thing's in a wood,
All ears and eyes, a tremble in each tread.
Thus hand in hand, flame-cheeked and thief-footed,
Unheard and unespièd, in-a-door
They stole, these lovers, and ere noon was o'er
A priest was fetched as fast as he might be,
For all his wonder, both his book and he.
The two were one, or e'er he went his way.
If any marvel here is naught to say
Of crowds, of church, of flowers, of mingling din
Of bells without and instruments within,

And friends and feast and other wedding-cheer,
To them, so marvelling, be answer here
That friends and feasting were there none at all.
Alone they wedded in a silent hall
As were none others in the world but they;
And hid them in the garden all the day,
With bats and owls; and with the falling dew
Stole into bed and did as lovers do.
All was of choice, not of necessity.
Alas, on passion, though sweet fare is he,
Yet surely sicken they, who solely feed.
Though of much company but little need
Have men and maidens on their wedding-day,
Yet is it wisdom against love's decay
To save up friends, and cloaks against the chill.
Men fall in love and out and Earth turns still.
    This recked they little as they lay that night,
Her young brown body in his arms of white,
Like a sweet sheaf of oats, all nodding o'er,
On a boy's breast, who never reaped before
And reaping striveth to be seen a man,
With face aflame, lacking the reaper's tan.
Wide was their window to the throngèd skies.
Night pressed cold palms upon the maiden's eyes
Fast, when sweet very shame would have her weep.
She was no maiden when she fell asleep;

Awakening to a kiss, a wife was she.
The sun arose and found her red as he.
Then down into the garden there to eat
What morn should number with the ripe and sweet,
And laugh with lips and finger-tips astain,
And live long hours of childhood o'er again,
For these were sweet as those and sweeter too.
Ah, hour by hour, and little as they knew—
As little cared, yet suffered so to play—
The sweet hours pitied them and went their way.
Two fair days linkèd with two fairer nights
Passed ere they fell, outwearied with delights,
From one another's lips and slumbered there
Strewing one pillow with two hues of hair.
On the third night there came a dream of dread
To Melisert. He dreamt that he was dead;
Then shrieked, and at his own, his bitter cry
Awoke and wrung the dream from either eye,
Panting and shuddering and cold with sweat.
Great was his comfort to be living yet
With his sweet wife. As of his wife thought he,
He stretched his hand and groped where she should be,
But found her not. He gropèd wide and wide,
Then flung an arm out on the further side.
Here in this hollow had her body been,
Here was no more. He callèd 'Melusine';

And in the silence of dead midnight air
Heard the cold clock which ticked upon the stair.
He flung the window wider. Through the bars
How wonderful was night, thick strewn with stars!
North, South and East and West, no single sound
Save of the river flowing in the ground,
And his own heart, now loud now deadly still.
Sudden, of words she spake upon the hill
He thought—'One night in seven wanders she.
That night is this and all as all should be.
Such was the covenant betwixt us both.
Thus much she told and bound me with an oath
No more to know. 'Tis well. It shall be kept.
Back into bed he stole and would have slept,
But sleep would none of him though wondrous fain.
Sleep knew ere he the quiet birth of pain.
Anon he heard it crying in his heart.
'Ah Melusine! how dear to me thou art,
Oft have I told thee; yet thou dost not know,
Or else, dear, never hadst thou left me so,
Unwakened and unwarned, without one kiss,
To wake in loneliness to pain like this.
Was this well done of thee, or kind, my bride?'
He tossed and turned him to his other side,
There found the trouble still and groanèd then—
'The love of women and the love of men,

Though they be namèd with a single name,
God witness them, whether they be the same.
I told her all—unto my heart's red heart
I laid me open and kept naught apart.
She hath her secrets which I must not see.
And why? She loves her secrets more than me.
Ah, we are wedded, sweet, one heart, not two.
Then wherefore secrets? I am bound, 'tis true,
And I am sworn and I must not complain.
Yet how she bound me, let me think again.
She asked and I, alas, I loved her so—
Could I but yield? She had the wit to know.
Well, so it is, and all the years to come
So it must be. I promised and am dumb.
Though bitter be to love and lonely lie,
Thou hast my word, dear, though no reason why.
So thou must be mine all, and I must be
All thine; such bargain betwixt thee and me!
Well, choose thy road, since I must not say nay.
If I might speak, there were a word to say.
A fool was I, too loving to deny.
The wiser thou, to win of me thereby.'
Thus tossed and fretted he the livelong night.
But what of that? No sooner came the light.
Like poison measured out with frowning care,
Hour after hour, the hours of his despair

Fell from the drowsy steeple, first to last,
Into his ears though holden ne'er so fast.
But when birds twittered and the stars went pale,
Weary with wakefulness and spent and stale
He slept. The sunlight gathering heat and strength
Over his bed had marched a pillow's length
And touched his eyelids, ere his eyes went wide.
And lo, his wife was sleeping at his side,
With shoulder heaving and with tresses strewn
And slow breast following sleep's silent tune,
And sleep's wan smile her parted lips about.
On whom he stared, his anger turned to doubt.
But when she wakenèd and breathed his name,
Wave upon wave, her sweetness on him came
So full and fast, doubt melted into bliss.
All was forgotten but to cling and kiss
And clasp her closer, his from face to feet;
He sighed for pain of her, she was so sweet,
And she grew red with him, he flamèd so.
Even when she flushed and chided, murmuring 'no,'
Sly joy was in her heart so fair to be,
Him and his anger, she could tame them, she.
There was no speech of aught these two between,
But a long kiss, and all as all had been.
So day by day, a lovely life they led.
With joy they gave their bodies unto bed

Each night and slumbered as of bed a part.
But ere the lark, a lark rose in each heart,
And, with no troubles but their kind to shun,
To woods and fields whither few came or none
They flew; and ever as they found at noon
Broad rivers upon reeds in lonely tune,
Or singing stream combing her emerald hair,
They sat and stripped and swam together there,
Like as a swan with a white swan doth swim.
He had no shame of her nor she of him.
Out on the grass oft would he heave her, yet
White from the water, her hairs dark with wet,
And link white lily-buds her brows about
And as the goddess of the spotted trout
Adore her naked on his naked knee.
'Twas sin and folly but how fair to see,
Had ever any seen; but none was nigh.
Their days were lonely as a plover's cry,
And each in each so utterly content,
They came not home again till all was spent,
And star on star out of Eve's ageing air
Dared the bright West and as he waned, waxed fair.
With eve they slept and with the morn they rose
To take their tale up where it sweet did close.
They lived well and they loved well and slept sound.
Yet ever in a week one night came round,

The night when he must stay and she must go,
And bear with her his sleep, he grievèd so.
And every week the sorer grievèd he,
And every week he bit his lip to see
Her of her beauty widowing his side.
And every lonely night he writhed and cried,
Of lonely nights that this should be the last,
For were he faster sworn than he was fast,
She should not thence again not telling why.
And all he vowed at midnight with none nigh,
Morn made a lie and laughed at, when there pressed
Two lips to his, two bosoms to his breast.
Some other time must serve, some other place.
He could not break oaths in so bright a face
Nor mar her happiness who made his own.
He set his lips to hers and for the moan
He might not utter nor yet cast away,
He locked it in his heart and there it lay.
    Men's lives are melodies and may not dwell
On one string ever, or the tune, farewell.
Soon their sweet summer sank in cold and wet.
Rain fell at dawn ; at dusk 'twas falling yet.
Alas, poor lovers, cheated of their bliss,
Wan at their windows, now at that, now this,
They read the rack and starvèd for the Sun.
The boy waxed cruel, ere the day was done,

For pain of pleasures hungered for, not had.
Then came an evil thought and made him glad.
He took, there kissing where he meaned to prey,
His wife in arms and thus he said his say—
'With pretty elbows wear no more the sill,
Sweet! Light is dying and it raineth still.
Give day for lost and lost among his showers
Our joys—he parts and with no thanks of ours.
Yet the rain gladdens me if thou knew'st how.
The night which cometh is the night which thou
Givest to wandering and I to pain;
But I suppose now that this self-same rain
Which rains from us the pleasant life we led,
This night will rain thy body to my bed,
And in this thought both arms I fling about
Thy sweet, sweet body. Nay, thou shalt not out.
This night thou shalt not wander to the wold,
Sweet ewe—thus close I and make fast thy fold.'
As more he said, and more was fain to say,
She thrust him sudden from her waist away
And fronted face to face and brow to brow,
White to her very lips which laughed not now.
Her eyes blazed; her lips moved distinct and slow—
'What art thou doing? Dost thou think and know?
I see thou dost. Ah, when thine heart hides lies,
Thou canst not wipe them from thy lips and eyes

For all thou strivest—not so clean and fair,
But that thy smiles are other than they were,
When 'twas no treason me in arms to take.
Nay, kiss me not—no kisses for God's sake,
By whom thou sworest and art now forsworn.
Alas,' she cried, 'that I was ever born.'
She staggered as she spoke: her eyes went out,
And as he sprang towards her with a shout,
The floor rang horribly to her gold head.
With eyes as when a stabber lifts his dead,
Her huddled and heaped beauty the boy bore
And laid it on a bed and moanèd o'er
Till her lids gave up a little of her eyes.
What need recount the sobbings and the sighs,
Now hers, now his, now mingling, both of both,
Wherewith he won her, though of life so loth
And he so sinning, not to die but live,
And pardon grant, and kisses take and give,
Faint kisses for his fiery, one for ten?
Whiles women are yet women and men men,
Of love, of quarrels, of repentings, none
Makes a new manner—the sweet ways are one.
Now he her pardon has and she her will,
And in her hour, when all the house was still
And the wind's roaring dulled the feet of rain,
Into the black, blind night she slipped again.

As was his wont, lone laid upon his bed
He thought. Upon a night so loud and dread,
A feeble thing seemèd her body sweet
To wander forth with naked head and feet.
Hard seemed all of her he might not know,
And he her husband; and he loved her so!
Should any learn of it, the thing were shame.
A man should keep in honour his wife's name,
Would she or no. As men are ruled or rule,
So are they deemed, this wise and that a fool.
Wives are weak wits to judge of good or bad.
Of him who drives her wisely one is glad,
Albeit she the while have wailed and striven:
Who wisely warns her, yet of her is driven,
When at the last she falls to sin and shame,
She counts the ruin hers and his the blame.
He serves her folly; her folly is his pay.
'If this be truth,' he mused, 'as others say—
If truth of others, why 'tis truth of me.
Fie on my folly! I begin to see.
I was afeared. She seemèd like to die,
Swooning and weeping—ah, what a fool was I!
'Twas by the craft of woman, what she did,
And all that I should do as I was bid,
Begging her pardon, being wronged the while.
Lo, in the best of wives what guile, what guile!

And yet, poor soul, for all her cunning, still
She won her own harm winning of her will
And fooled herself the more in fooling me;
For were I master—as I yet shall be—
She were not naked now in rain and cold
And full of terrors, if the truth were told,
But warm, asleep together, she and I.
On her own misery she dotes, and why?
I know not; yet I know 'tis all amiss.
And for her reason, be it that or this,
I learn one lesson to be learned of men—
'Tis kindness to be cruel now and then.
Therefore I swear—and as I say, I do—
This matter is not ended 'twixt us two,
Nor yet begun. But ere a new day go,
'Twill be begun and ended, tears or no.'
Thus minded, he forgot his cares near day
In sleep, and when he woke, there his wife lay.
The morn was blue and gold, the skies aglow,
The storm all heapèd into hills of snow
Sailed down the wind, and fast in fellowship
Sang out the birds. Each ringing like a whip
Hit all four walls which were the garden's bound,
And so had hit them in a greater ground,
With his sharp music. Full from bank to bank
The stream made eager sound of one who drank.

All branches of all trees let fall a store
Of drops to earth which had enough before.
And into such a morrow he and she
Stepped forth in seeming full of joys to be
And sate, the river singing as it flows,
In arbours sweetened with rain-wetted rose.
She chattered merrily, heart-whole of care,
But he said naught. Of silence grown aware
As of a shadow fallen on the place,
She turned and read him on the eyes and face,
Then with a kiss asked him 'is aught amiss?'
And passionate he paid her kiss for kiss,
Putting his arms about her, and thus spake.
'This I must utter or my heart must break.
And choose thou whether—for such pain is there,
That if the like in thine one moment were,
Thou would'st forgive me falsing what I swore.
What is an oath, sware I an hundred more,
That men should eat away their hearts with rue,
In grief more bitter as in love more true?
O sweet my wife, release, release me now.
Thou knowest (oh who knoweth, if not thou?)
How little is my wit, how seldom wise;
And when I swore I had nor ears nor eyes,
Nor wit to understand nor will to choose.
I saw thee in the scales to win or lose,

Fair as a Goddess and without attire.
What could I do but swear to thy desire?
Where was another way? I ask thee where?
There lives no man in all the world, I swear,
But in that minute he had sworn as I.
Thou wilt not tie me to this misery
With an old oath. But that I loved thee so,
I had not sworn; but that I trusted, no,
I had not sworn. Betray not love and trust
To pain, dear; thou dost evil, if thou dost!'
And trembling here he paused. And trembling too
She sighed, 'Alas! Is all again to do?
Is it a dream then which I dreamed, that thou
Didst wrong me, husband, as thou wrongest now;
Then with the false, false lips which did that wrong,
Kiss me full oft and flatter me full long,
Till pardoned in thy tears and on thy knees?
Not soon thou wonnest pardon nor with ease,
Yet all too easily, for lo, once more
Thou wipest lips to sin thine old sin o'er!
Ah, for thy sweet sake and since thou dost grieve,
Dear, as thou tellest me and I believe,
I pardon thee twice sinning, twice untrue.
I pardon thee; ev'n as I did, I do
And shall again, alas! Where will it end?
For of thy falseness thou hast yet to spend.

Too easily forgiven, thou hast espied
This in thy fool, the fool were wise to hide—
How comes no anger to this heart at all,
But only agony to watch befall
On me and thee the certain ending—woe.
The wrong to me is nothing. Let it go!
(Yet to tell truth, dear, ere they do this wrong,
Men should bear bitter things and bear them long).
I will pass over and put wrongs away,
To tell thee this—and hearken what I say.
Not without reason when I plighted troth,
I set thee terms and bound thee with an oath,
Nor without reason hold thee to it now.
Thou deem'st me not, for all thou sayest, thou,
So vile beneath the breast and vain above
As to grieve thee could I glad thee whom I love?
How canst thou then—nay but thou canst not clear
Thy course of sin and folly. Leave it, dear.
Here parts the way. Now choose thee that or this,
But know in choosing if thou choose amiss,
Thou bringest ruin upon me and thee,
Not as I fear but as I know and see.'
'Thou know'st?' quoth he. 'Hear then what I do know.
There's no such peril, though thou fablest so.
But be there peril, as sure, I say, there's none,
Then set it in mine eyes to seek or shun

As I shall judge of it. I am a man,
And thou a woman, and what women can
In perilous chance, if such affrights thee now,
That men can better and better I than thou.
Bear with this saying, for in love 'tis said—
Thou art my wife, the woman I have wed.
In this as all must thou be ruled by me.
Wife, I must thither whither thou,' quoth he,
'Or whither that thou wilt and what to do,
This thou shalt tell and thou shalt tell me true.'
She answered, bright of eyes, heaving her breast—
'How speakest thou—in earnest or in jest?'
Quoth he, 'As who shall do the thing he speaks.'
She rose upon her feet with flaming cheeks—
'Thou shalt not, shalt not. If thou dost,' she cried,
'Oh if thou dost, how hast thou lied and lied!
Thou swor'st an oath, an oath thou sworest me;
Ere thou wert sworn, I was a maid,' quoth she.
No more her tongue could, so her breast did swell.
'But tell me what I ask, and all is well,'
He cried and kissed her: but her cheek put on
No warm flags that his lips had come and gone.
Then thrice he kissed and thrice her name he cried:
Oft as he asked, as often she denied.
'How, wife?' quoth he, 'If thou didst love, nor feign,
Had I thus often asked and asked in vain?'

She answered not his chiding; only grave,
Large eyes she gave him, but no word she gave.
And suddenly, as oft chances in man's heart,
His love took hurt and spake in bitter part.
His tongue he had not known save by his sound,
So well he spake, and every word a wound.
He said she loved not, said she had no shame;
That wedding him, she wedded but a name
And wealth, and having these, no more cared she;
That if she would not love, no more would he.
He said, men look to give and look to take;
That he had given his all, and for its sake
Got nothing—not a word to quite a kiss.
What would she more of him? No more was his.
He had no more to give, nor she to get:
Since he was empty, nor she fillèd yet,
Best part. Why wept she? Best be glad therefore.
And thus and thus he spake and more and more.
All bitter he could think, he threw it in,
And where he left, he did again begin.
Wide-eyed, death-white, wincing to the whip,
With twining hands and quivering eager lip,
She stood and strove to speak and strove again.
But feeding sweet on her white face of pain,
He stayed not. Wrath is of its nature so,
While aught yet stands it works to lay it low.

More cruel, cruel as he spake and spake,
At length he hit her where she needs must break,
And broke. Down streamed the tears for all the pride,
The unwilling tears which trembling hands would hide.
Out broke the sobs. Blind and with bowèd head,
Unknowing and uncaring where, she fled,
And left him in his triumph and his wrong
To silence and his soul, avengers strong.
Lo, ere day ended, ere the stripes of even,
Once more they kissed, forgiving and forgiven,
And round their garden paced in pleasant speech.
About the other was the arm of each.
Oft their lips met, like friends of meeting fain,
Who part not soon, and part to meet again.
But for their quarrel and the care it brought,
They closèd eyes and thrust it from their thought
And from their tongues. A quarrel, when it ends,
Let tongues not touch, no, not to make amends.
And many happy years they thought to see
And than times past a better time to be;
And both at one, and in that thought content,
They gave cheeks lips and so to bed they went.

PART III

Man's soft and cruel heart, it crieth still
For love, and loved is never loved its fill.
Young Melisert loved well his wife, and she,
Love as he might, loved him again as free.
Yet in one matter, as in all else he could,
Because he might not wind her as he would,
Again he fretted and again he grieved,
And cried she loved him not and half believed,
And in his heart's heart, while he made his moan,
Fell craving for her pain to heal his own.
Woe to that heart, hath ever in his pain
Drunk other's blood! Who hath, he will again.
His haggard heart which slumbered from repast,
Soon as it woke, he threw his eyes as fast
On happy Melusine, not dreaming woe:
She flew upon her business to and fro
From room to room and sang a note of cheer
To him, there silent. Then her heart knew fear
For all her feigning and he knew she feared.
She knew that watched his eyes when the knife neared,
In keener agony to watch it come
Than when it cut her and the wounds went numb.
And when he spoke, his one his weary quest
Became a beaten road in brain and breast

Morn, noon and eve. And sick to hear him name
The thing he would, sick to deny the same,
Sick to contend 'Oh mercy, sweet,' cried she,
Wet-eyed and wearied out, 'now let me be.
Thou breakest oath in asking. Neither tell
I may nor will, and this thou knowest well.
Peace, peace!' Yet clamoured he, and as he spoke,
He joyed to feel his wrath rise, till it broke
And spoilt her pleading; for her lips were stilled,
Poor lips, unable of the words they willed,
Striving and tremulous. He spied her pain,
And gladder grew and struck and struck again.
Wrath flattered him with strength. And partly too
Her beauty now in eyes no longer new
Stung not his sense save she were bruisèd well
'Twixt palm and palm like leaves men crush and smell.
But bitter as he spoke, more bitter she
Wept who well might. Love was her only tree
In all her days to yield her pleasant fruit,
And lo, his words were axes at the root.
His eyes were holden, he might not espy
The thing he did. His ears against her cry
He stopped. And as the love betwixt the pair
Beneath his strokes withered and ceased to bear,
In wrath to lose, unwitting whence they grew,
He deeper struck to seek the joys he slew.

Thus much of him and his mad tongue. But she—
Her grave, large eyes, which could not choose but see,
Filled now, but with a grief beyond his guess.
If she wept now, she wept to love him less
Each sunset, and for dread of the cold light
Of every dawn which made him in her sight
Meaner and less. It was her passionate will
Less to be loved now than to love on still:
Not to lose love, whatever she should win,
Not to lose love, not to grow cold within,
Dead, old and cold. But passionless and strong
The stream of time, which bears broad worlds along
On his broad breast unknowing, naught abides
The cries of hungering handfuls in the sides
Of men and women. These, their brief hour o'er,
Who in their height of having would have more,
Are taught of time to live with less and less,
Till broken of the last wish they acquiesce
In losing all. Time now his glass doth turn:
As the sand runs, so Melusine must learn,
For all she weeps and would not have it so,
How sweet love dies. Her love is dying slow,
Nursed by unwilling, wistful grief to lose,
And lovely selfless thoughts which self accuse,
And kindness. Strange, that in love's dying hour
She grew more kind than when her love had power.

Waxed the lad rude and bitter, soft she smiled
As smiles a mother on her raving child,
Who strives in vain to wound with what he cries;
He is so little and she so kind and wise.
And were he kind, she would steal up and stand
Long by his chair, his hair beneath her hand;
And on his brows when silent lips she set,
He stared for wonder that her eyes were wet.
Through dusk and over dews he sought and found
One eve his wife walking their garden ground.
Fallen was her hood, her hair. She lifted brow
Toward the bright melancholy west, ev'n now
Fast ebbing from the stars it held. His tread
She heard and turning took his hand and spread
Hers over his and his upon her heart.
They stood—he wondering, she worlds apart,
The dying coals of Even in her gaze
'Neath eyelids which seemed sinking down with day's.
One-souled were she and Even; she felt power
To think his huge thought with yon glowing hour;
Yea, the bright grief which all the Heaven spanned,
Shrank to her side and yearned beneath her hand.
'What for thy thoughts?' he laughed. The silence broke,
She started, sighed, smiled, sighed again and spoke—
'Ah, I dreamed, yes. Yet there are matters, dear—
In head and heart I hold them, here and here—

Would fain be told; but words are hard to find,
And haply harder so thou speak not kind,
And oh thou knowest not, thou canst not know,
How long it is since thou hast spoken so,
Who hast spoken much—much, Melisert,' wept she;
'Perchance thou carest not—it well may be.
(Nay, I have done; let be.) Well, they are far,
Those sweet times, now. So were we; thus we are,
And not the first, no, nor the last, I trow:
Many a poor woman in years long ago
Has stared hard, bitter hard, on yonder sky
And let fall these, thinking such thoughts as I,
And many shall again; for love to lose
Is an old path and one we women use.'
Her low voice trembled on and ceasèd there.
She gave the West awhile her dreamy stare,
Then sudden sobbed—'for all that since befel,
Dear, never dream, but that I loved thee well.'
He dared not look on her, but whispered low—
'Dost thou not love me—is thy meaning so?'
They stood. At last the silence, long as death,
Broke to the soft in-drawing of her breath,
And at the sound he felt a cold sword glide
Within and on the blade his breast divide,
Then pain spread pulsing from the wound away.
He said no word; he found no word to say,

Whetting his lip. Loud sang his either ear.
The flaming West flamed higher and came near.
The flaming West fell in and smouldered red;
Yet stood they motionless, and no word said.
Sidelong she read him on his lips and brow
And yearned to comfort him but knew not how.
I know not why—it rushed into her breast,
'Tis but my secret robbeth us of rest;
So did it first, so shall it ever do,
And never peace shall be betwixt us two,
Till all be uttered and naught left behind.
Then might we live as faithful, true and kind
As sad poor men and women' (musèd she),
'Have many, who as little loved as we.'
And with the thought she let her forehead fall
Into her hands for strength to tell him all,
And sought the word, and still it was to seek.
'Thus shall I say,' thought she, 'thus shall I speak,
Now while I may.' At once a belfry tower
Smote from the bell the sound which ends an hour:
And heavily, hearing his iron tone,
She raisèd brow. And lo, she stood alone.
For he was gone, gone, pale with pain and pride,
As o'er a wound his hand upon his side.
He passed and left her to her own content.
Light waned, yet right and left the way he went,

He noted common things grown clear with pain.
His passion came in shocks, darkening his brain,
And left him shivering. Counting of his cost,
First to be found was that her love was lost.
Next casting in his thoughts to win her back,
That way or this way, ended every track
In calm kind eyes which pitied and looked through.
He slew the sight; as fast it sprang anew.
Ah, bitter was her pity as him thought,
And in his breast so fierce a longing fought
To sting that pity, and he cared not how,
As in his life he had never longed till now.
But though she wrought him evil, evil, she,
Go struggle as he might, she still went free,
Free, past his power to gladden or to grieve!—
An evil thought stole near and plucked his sleeve.
He lent it ear, and smiled and smote his knees,
Then smoothed his mien and turning at his ease
Greeted his wife. She faltering and slow
Had followed, peering were he wroth or no.
'Twas in her mind, befall what should befall,
To speak and make an end and tell him all.
They met; and she spake not. For, truth be told,
But pity of his pain had made her bold.
She looked for pain, lo, and he mocked her stare.
Not pale was he, but blithe and debonair.

What sudden thing had chanced to make him glad?
All was forgotten which in heart she had.
To his own hurt, he of his smiles made lies.
That night he lay abed with closèd eyes,
Awake but feigning slumber in his breath.
If she lay still, he lay as still as death.
When through their window peered the broad, round moon
('Twas falling now and would be setting soon),
Soft Melusine stirred and long listenèd—
Then hearing naught she slipped her from the bed
And through the doors forth stole into the night.
And he was up and after her as light.
The moon dazzles his eyes. Yonder goes she!
Then both went gliding by bush, stone and tree,
Tree, bush and stone, under and round and o'er,
In silence, he behind and she before,
Now bright in shine, now shadows in the shade,
Now that, now this, and all in silence played.
She hastened and he hastened: she made stay,
He stayed. To both alike from far away
Came hoot of owls and song of water, still
By night as day bound seaward from his hill.
Sore beat his heart, sore chidden so to beat.
On sped she; and he followed. Now her feet,

They sought the forest and that hill above,
Where first they met, where first they vowèd love.
Such was his thought and when he saw 'twas so,
He left to follow her and let her go
From ear and eye (this chase was well begun);
Then swift and sudden he began to run
About her path, fetching a circle wide,
And up that hill climbed on his further side;
There flung him in the fern his length along,
Panting, and waited her, nor waited long.
Or e'er his breath, yet painèd by the steep,
Could learn the measure he would have it keep,
Hers heard he. Once the low moon at his back
Shone on her clear, then set, and all was black.
As sank the moon began the fairy hours;
This hill was theirs and yonder were their bowers.
Ah, better vengeance than he dreamed, and worse
Is Melisert's. Fall'n is the fairy curse.
Of Melusine the life is forfeited.
Against their laws she has a mortal led
To the fairies' ground, albeit unawares.
Heard Melisert, with rising of his hairs,
Waver a pipe, no sleepier than whose tune
Are meadows around foaming weirs in June,
Ere the mowers mow them. Down his head with sleep
Swayed; down his lids sank; up they could not keep.

Small heed of others have his eyes and ears.
Sleep locks them fast, deep sleep, for all his fears,
Sweet sleep. And when he woke an hour ere day—
Birds calling in wet woods, East growing grey,
Light gathering fast—and rose and round him peered,
Fled like a dream, men marvel to have feared,
Were dread of night and unexplainèd sound.
Lo, to the Eastward on the dewy ground,
Wrapt in her cloak, alone sat Melusine,
And round her on the turf a ring of green.
Her face was fixèd on the dawn. Her ear
Told her his coming; and as he stole near,
Slowly her face she turned, pale-cheeked, wet-eyed.
Her lifted finger drew him to her side.
He feared reproach, feeling her eyes; and came
Shaping light words to hide a touch of shame.
She chided not. Tender and sweet and dim
And like a star, while the dawn quenches him,
She looked; and when she spoke, gently she spoke,
Bidding him sit and spreading him her cloak.
So seated, there they talked. Her talk was still
Of wood and stream, of cavern and of hill,
And of those mornings and how sweet they were
When first they met, when last they wandered there;
Each naming in its turn, thoughtful and slow,
With loving tongue and loth to let it go;

Her pale cheek flushing, her far-fixèd eyes
Turning on his, attending his replies.
And when she saw his breast heave with her speech,
Then hand in hand she led him round to each,
From hill to forest and from stream to cave;
And unto each in turn soft greeting gave,
The cavern last. Him in her softest tones
She blessed and kissed and stroked him on his stones.
Laughed Melisert her goodly game to see.
'Thou wast in anger, Melisert, with me
But yester eve,' she said. 'Are we now friends?'
'Friends, friends,' he whispered. 'Then here our quarrel ends?'
'It ends,' quoth he. 'Ah Melusine,' he cried,
'Why hast thou hidden with no cause to hide
Thy comings hither? Wherefore, and so long,
Kept us in strife, each wrongèd and each wrong?
Why, why, my Melusine, who art so wise?
Oh, I did wrong, I feel it in thine eyes,
To break mine oaths and follow thee this night;
Yet of my wrong see how all cometh right!
Strife is accord, and we are friend and friend
For a little wrong and an old oath to mend.'
With shining looks she made him answer sweet
'Hold hands and hearken, sitting at my feet,'

Poor Melisert, who wilt so soon be wise.'
Right there she told him to his wondering eyes,
How fairy-bred, how born of earthly breed,
How she was thrall, how from her thraldom freed,
Yet upon terms. Then of her terms she spoke,
Of how she kept them and of how she broke;
All her whole tale to that unlucky morn.
And when she closed, he laughed in loving scorn
'What, dying, Melusine? What, wilt thou die?
What, have I slain thee? Love, in truth not I.
Thou art in dreams!' 'Look on my lips and cheek.
Melisert, I am dying as I speak,
Yea, were dead now, but for a boon I won,
An hour of life, until the rising sun.
That hour I asked, that hour was given,' quoth she,
'But for one end—to take farewell of thee.
Farewell, farewell. Lo, breaking is the day.'
She paused and panted, seeking words to say,
Which having found and fitted to her thought,
Her brows she bowèd and his mantle caught
In her two hands. Thus spake she, thus she said,
In clear tones musical of tears unshed—
'If ever, Melisert—as chance may be—
If ever thou hast grief for cause of me,
Think on this hour, and say amidst thy pain
'I had this good of her and that was gain.'

If ever thou art movèd in thy mind
Of poor, poor Melusine to thoughts unkind
For the little good in her, the much amiss,
Think on this hour—remember her by this.
If ever to thy grief come to thy mind
Aught thou hast said, aught thou hast done unkind
(Oh, all things come about, dear, now or then!)
Think on this hour; say o'er and o'er again,
'She laid on me a burden past my strength,
Which long I bore, although I broke at length.
Ere I craved pardon, she unasked forgave
Against the years when I must want and crave.'
And now her part is played and her speech o'er.
'Kiss Melusine—she will not vex thee more.'
His lips he turned for hers, but ere they pressed,
Her kiss swerved midway and sank to her breast.
Down, slackening, she sank. He sprang to shake
And chide her, passionate, and bid her wake.
One hand to head, her other on the ground,
She kneeled and opening let wander round
Her vacant eyes on cavern, turf and stone,
Foxglove and fern, and last upon his own.
Then lit her eyes, then smiled to understand.
Half rose she babbling with beseeching hand—
'Boy, spare the stag, bright boy'—and fell and passed.
And of all smiles her loveliest was her last.

The day broke. When the noon was o'er his head
He rose from calling her and knew her dead.
From underneath the hand which hid his eyes
Tears ran down silently, while he grew wise
All the long day. Night hid him on the crest
Still sitting, the dead stranger to his breast.

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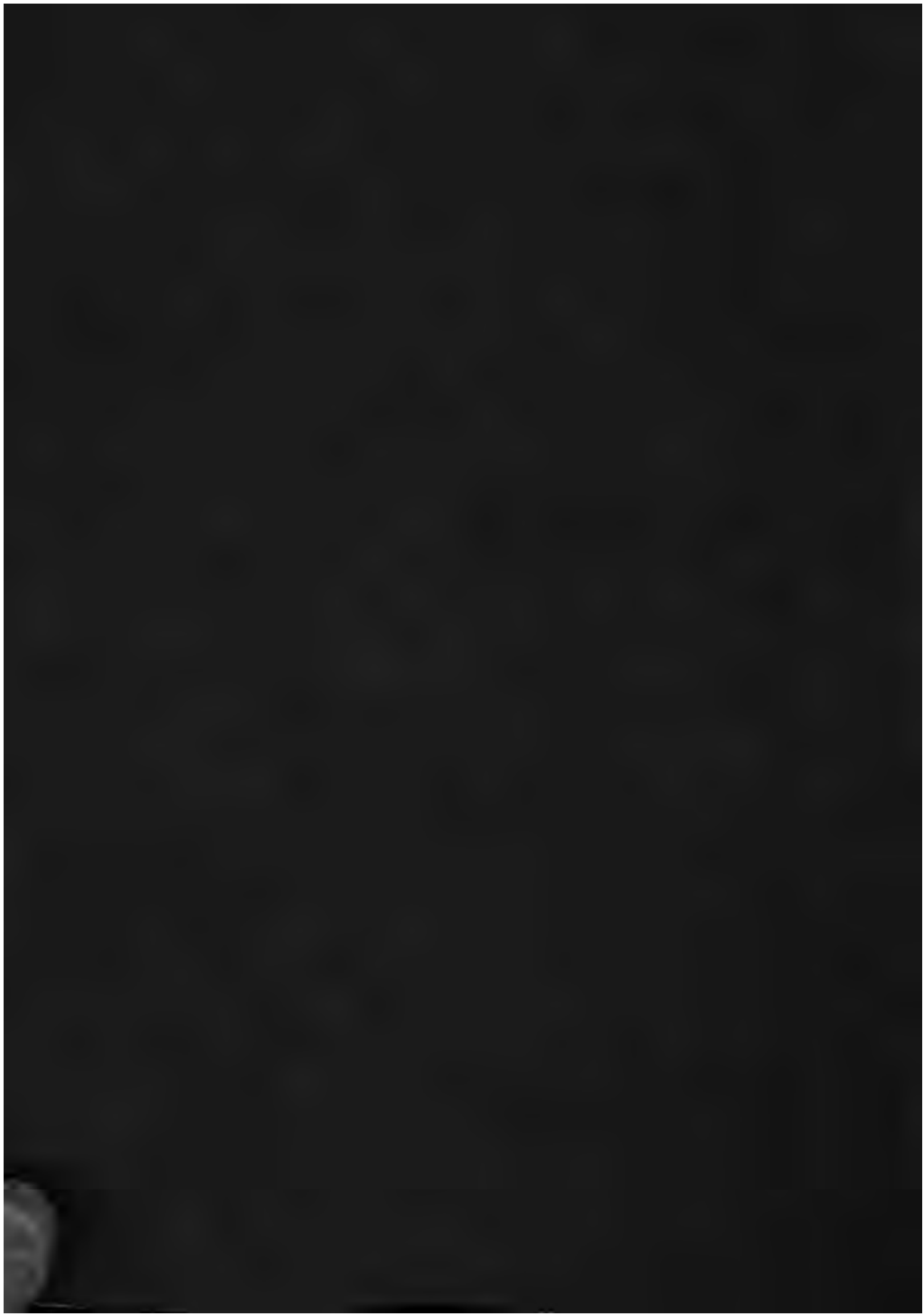

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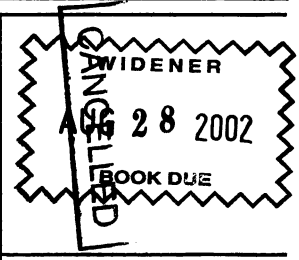

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